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Professor Vernallis,

This shorter essay serves as a companion piece to the longer writing. If I've made any sense at all, this should be read after reading the longer piece. Thank you again for the opportunity to write on this subject.

– JW

If Paris is Burning, Who has the Right to Say So?

“All of the things that James Baldwin wrote about were in this ballroom. How do we construct our identity? How do you live in a consumerist society while not having access? How do you love yourself when you don't look like what society says you're supposed to look like? So, I started reading crazily, reading anything I thought might relate...There was a sense that maybe I shouldn't do it because of my identity...I mean, obviously, this is African-American and Latino culture, and I'm a Jewish girl from Beverly Hills — I have to steep myself in what the brightest people can tell me about storytelling, about African-American culture and history. I didn't think it was going to give me the right, but it would give me the information to go on...People come up to me and say that the film meant something to them. Trans people do. And that's wonderful. It's every creative person's dream. You do it for your own pleasure, and you do it because you want to communicate something.” – *Jennie Livingston, Interview with Saeed Jones, BuzzFeed.com, March 22, 2013.*

What have I done here? Well, I've taken the account of Jennie Livingston's interview for a website and I've stitched together various quotes of hers in my attempt to capture, at least in part, her essential feelings about the making of *Paris is Burning* and the reactions it engendered. I have hardly captured the essential account of *Paris is Burning*, much less the essential account of Jennie Livingston herself. Have I captured the essential account of Livingston's complete thoughts on the film? I don't believe I've even done that as it pertains to this single interview. So what have I done here? I suppose if I offered some kind of analysis on the quotes, as it pertains to Livingston or the film, then I've offered you my thesis on Livingston and her documentary about gay, black, transgender males in late 80's New York City. Depending on my aim, I may have

used these quotes to offer a portrait of Livingston, filmmaking, sexual identity, Jewish culture, black culture, cultural appropriation, or New York City, amongst other topics. Am I allowed to do so? I am not gay, black, transgender, and neither white nor Jewish. Also, I have never lived in NYC, much less lived there during the late 80's. However, I am male. In my analysis of Livingston, am I to interrogate not just the male gaze, but also *my* male gaze, in order to grasp an understanding of her, the film, or any other surrounding topic? Is all of this filtering necessary? Do my given or obtained features, or lack of those features, necessarily prevent me from commenting thoughtfully on any of these subjects, and thus, contributing something meaningful to our understanding of them? I believe not. If I took these quotes and started gathering footage of the making of *Paris is Burning* and made a documentary film from it, could my film be a biased, self-serving look at whiteness, blackness, gayness, Jew-ness, transgender-ness, NYC-ness, and any other kind of “-ness”? Perhaps it would if I was an LA-centric, myopic, homophobic, sexist, racist person. Would this biased portrait have any use? We are tempted to believe that it has none. However, couldn't we gain something from its existence, as it is, and thus potentially lose something by its erasure or editing in suiting our judgments? After all, the snippets of imagery, testimony, sounds, and other things I've assembled for my biased pleasure are things that actually occurred in the world, even if they were coerced and manipulated by yours truly. Isn't it possible that we can learn something through our judgment of the film's bias? It even seems possible that I, the creator, could learn something about *my* perspective, *my* racism, sexism in general, *et al.* by watching and analyzing the film. It seems possible that the analysis of my own film could change me, for the better, or even for the worse. After all, sometimes we learn through something how to be, and other times we learn from a thing how not to be. Ultimately, we must ask ourselves how we came to this judgment. Did we check my portrait, my thesis, against the other portraits of Livingston, *Paris is Burning*, or gay culture in order to make judgment, or did we check my

portrait against some notion of “Who is Jennie Livingston?” or “What is *Paris is Burning?*” or “What is Gay Culture?” with the misguided thought that my account was an attempt to offer *the essential account* on those subjects? If we employed the former approach, then our judgment necessarily has a use. At the very least, it shows us what various forms of bias can look like and probably much more. If we made judgment based on the latter approach, we’ve made a mistake, since one account necessarily cannot be *The Account*. We know this through our critique concerning a subject as a whole, and by our critique on the various portraits of that subject we have available to us. Each portrait serves as a single thesis, and each of these theses have a use in building up the larger mosaic, the larger portrait of the subject as it is in the world. When we take a step back, we see that each thesis, even the biased ones, offer a certain dimension and color with regard to this larger mosaic. We examine it, critique it, and add our own dimension and color to it, producing what could be called a subject’s “public character”. We then step forward again and place even the most biased thesis in its appropriate place in our construction of the larger mosaic. Having established this, let’s look at Bell-Hooks critique of *Paris is Burning* in and pose a few questions, many of which I leave open for answering:

“...the film was a graphic documentary portrait of the way in which colonized black people worship at the throne of whiteness...the ‘we’ evoked here is all of us, black people/people of color, who are daily bombarded by a powerful colonizing whiteness...that negates that there is beauty to be found in any form of blackness that is not imitation whiteness (149)...it is this current trend...that makes it possible...for whites to appropriate black culture without interrogating whiteness or showing concern for the displeasure of blacks...(154)” – *Bell-Hooks, Is Paris Burning?*

Is Bell-Hooks presenting her critique of the film by checking back against other portraits or some essential account of “blackness” and “whiteness” that Livingston had a duty to abide by? If it’s the former, then we can accept the critique in terms of the film’s place amongst the other portraits. If it’s the latter, even if Livingston interrogated her “whiteness” onscreen, who is to

determine how much is enough in allowing her to establish this perspective and move on? Is the interrogation of “whiteness” part of Livingston’s agenda? I’m not sure. The film is not some other film called, “America is Burning” and further, Livingston has no duty to follow anything other than the thesis she intended to communicate. Once it is out of her hands, if we aim to understand the film and its place, it becomes our job to critique it and find its appropriate place.

“Any audience hoping to be entertained would not be as interested in the true life stories and testimonies narrated...Is this the way the black men view their reality or is this the reality Livingston constructs? (154)...Livingston appears unwilling to interrogate the way assuming the position of outside looking in, as well as interpreter, can, and often does, pervert and distort one’s perspective. Her ability to assume such a position without rigorous interrogation of intent is rooted in the politics of race and racism (152)...Hence it is easy for white observers to depict black rituals as spectacle (150)”.

Isn’t there an assumption here that an insider’s perspective is not a kind of distortion of true accounts as well? After all, documentaries are a kind of thesis on its subject and therefore it contains distortion through its very construction as a perspective. Or is the objection that Livingston, the outsider, misses some essential characteristic? Perhaps, this is the notion that there exist things are either incomprehensible to outsiders or cannot be understood in the same “essential” way that insiders can understand it. Much can be said here. For our purposes, however, let’s use an example and say that we have a hide painting of American soldiers made by a Plains Indian tribe member, and at the same time, we are also presented with a pictorial account of the Plains Indians created by the soldiers. Is the allegation that the soldiers could not possibly understand the essential character of the hide painting of them, since they didn’t create it, or that they could not possibly grasp the essential character of the Plains Indians pictorial they have constructed, since they are not tribe members? Does this mean neither party should have tried depicting the other without first interrogating their own effect on the other? If so, when is it ok to move on to the real subject? Is this “seeing of one through one’s effect on the other” the

only dimension that matters? Further, who is the outsider here, to what are they outside of, and does the outsider's perspective of the insider have no use to either party? Isn't it the case that members from each group could contribute meaningful analysis, varying in their degree of usefulness, to each work?

Well, if we recall the apparatus, and see that a viewer's critique of a film is what adds further dimension to the thesis presented by the creator, we are reminded that the living portrait is a joining of thesis and critique, where the critique contributes to the depth, color and dimension of that portrait. In this sense, each party's critique of either work necessarily contributes something to our understanding of each subject. Perhaps the outsider's critique isn't as insightful and misses certain things that an insider would never miss. However this is to be understood, if we recall the construction of our larger mosaic of a subject being constituted not just by thesis, but also by our critique of the thesis, the outsider's perspective is necessary nonetheless if only as a perspective of "what has not been understood". Further, we can come to grasp the misunderstanding by our critique of the "insufficient" perspective in relation to the other "sufficient" perspectives. In other words, this process allows us to learn something useful and gain further insight on a subject through distinction. To appropriate a Wittgenstein-kind-of-thought: What is this essential account that only you can understand that cannot be expressed for my understanding? If it cannot be expressed, how do *you* understand it and on what grounds do you hold it up as the essential account? By accepting that the meaningfulness of a documentary comes from the presentation of thesis, our critique of it and our reflections on the critiques in relation to one another, an outsider's analysis of the insider's work has no choice but to add further dimension to our understanding of a subject, no matter how much we object or disagree with its thesis. After all, from the disagreement we may come to grasp further dimensions

concerning the subject when we assign the “incorrect” interpretation to its appropriate place on the larger living portrait.

“By cinematically masking this reality (we hear her ask questions but never see her), Livingston...assumes an imperial overseeing position that is in no way progressive or counter-hegemonic. By shooting the film using a conventional approach to documentary and not making clear how her standpoint breaks with this tradition, Livingston assumes a privileged location of ‘innocence’ (151)”.

Our last question: Is Bell-Hooks trapped in the apparatus of documentary filmmaking? She assumes that Livingston is responsible for “cinematically masking” herself, since she remains off-camera as the invisible interlocutor. If she made the same film, except for the fact that she was on camera, would her thesis presented in *Paris is Burning* have changed? Wouldn’t she just have created another kind of effect, *the effect of embodied presence*, which would then be up for its own critique? Is it the case that Livingston assumes a “privileged position of ‘innocence’” or is it that this is just an effect of the apparatus itself, in which case Livingston would have unavoidably created one effect or another? If we accept that the apparatus necessarily creates these kinds of effects, even the effect of having no effect, then we see that our blame is misplaced. What would a documentary look like if it were possible to construct one that didn’t inherently give off some impression that was inauthentic to the account of *when*, *where* and *how*?

One example of a single documentary being the account of its subject without effect would be something like placing cameras at every angle, and doing a real-time 3D render of the *when’s*, *where’s*, and *how’s* of Los Angeles in a documentary entitled, “The Real Los Angeles”. Of course, in examining whether this account of Los Angeles is authentic and without effect: would this documentary, or its thesis, ever end? Maybe the thesis is established when the voiceover states, “This is Los Angeles” and that’s that; but isn’t this the effect of artificial authority telling us what the city *is*? Or perhaps we have a set of voiceovers, one speaking for the subject, another

interpreting, and another providing poetry (Prahtibha, 71). Or maybe we have an embodied tour guide, pointing out the monuments in town; well what about a random person in the city? Is she not worth mentioning? Is our guide “guilty” of anything? Even if “letting the images speak for themselves” or the “ultimate set of voiceovers” works somehow in this case, could we ever stop watching it if we are to apply our critique in order to get something meaningful from its watching? Finally, is the real-time render itself an effect, or is it required that the city be constructed to scale? This is not to say that Livingston wouldn’t have appeared less “innocent” or “imperial” if her body was represented onscreen. Rather, it’s the suggestion that even if she had done so, that effect would merely have been the effect of appearing less innocent/imperial through her embodiment onscreen. In other words, we cannot blame Livingston for being the director of a documentary, which necessarily has within its apparatus the property of generating this kind of effect, while believing that our blame has any merit.

In the end, is Bell-Hooks’ critique of Livingston, and her film, useful to us? It is meaningful in any way? As long as we do not check her critique against some notion of the essential account of Jennie Livingston or *Paris is Burning*, we see that it is. Does her critique add dimension to our understanding of *Paris is Burning*? It does, in that it gives us an interesting perspective from which we can get further understanding of race, sexual identity, authenticity and even of that time in New York, amongst other things. It also gives us insight into Jennie Livingston as a person, as an artist, and the perspectives that exist of her in each sense. Ultimately, Bell-Hooks’ critique also gives us information from which we can construct our portrait of Bell-Hooks as a thinker, a woman, a person of color, and as a human being. The question of the appropriate place for Bell-Hooks’ critique in the larger view of Livingston, *Paris is Burning*, and Bell-Hooks is available to us as well. All of these things are available to us given that we check our own beliefs, our own theses, against the right question. Using the right approach,

we are able to construct a mosaic that gives us something like the essential account of our subject, as it is, in the world. Doing otherwise, then, is to potentially remove ourselves from the clarity on the very thing we aim to understand by our judging of a single account to be illegitimate in a way that it cannot be.